

Behind the Microphone: Presenting Tips for Larger Audiences

by Jessica Ullery, Accent Technologies

Rock stars, politicians and professional speakers all have one thing in common - the great ones know how to work a crowd. On stage or "unplugged," they seem to have a gift for connecting with the audience.

To be effective as a business presenter, you need skills that aren't all that different, especially when the venue is large and the audience is standing room only. Keep the following tips in mind when preparing your next presentation and you'll be ready to work the crowd like a pro:

Leave the fog machine in the garage. Unless you're in a heavy metal band, go easy on using special effects in your presentation. Be careful not to let animations, sounds and background images overwhelm your message. "Don't sacrifice clarity for gee-whiz effects," says presentation specialist Kelly Forbes of [Accent Technologies](#), developers of Presentation Librarian software. "When projecting slides for a large audience, it's best to use clean, dark background colors like blue or black with white or yellow text."

Work the room. There's no need to prowl the audience like an afternoon talk-show host, but professional speakers agree getting out from behind the podium is the best way to connect with an audience - especially in a darkened hotel ballroom or conference center where making eye contact is difficult. Use a wireless microphone and a computer projection system that allows you to control the presentation by remote. Moving even a few steps away from the podium will keep the audience alert and promote more active listening.

Use cue cards. Think of each slide in your presentation as a cue card - not a script. Veteran business presenter Pete McChrystal, president of Accent Technologies, says, "Bullet points should be cues to the presenter and reinforcing messages for the audience - not just long paragraphs with dots in front of them." When presenting in a large venue, keep the number of bullet points on a slide to between five and seven, or the text will be too small to read when it's projected onscreen. If you need to include more than seven bullets, divide the content over two slides.

Practice being spontaneous. Mark Twain, whose sold-out lecture tours were nearly as popular as his books, once said, "It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech." Create an FAQ slide and make sure any additional presentations or supporting materials you might need are in a separate folder on your laptop so you can access them easily. Practice "unscripted" sections of your presentation, like Q & A sessions. Claudyne Wilder of [Wilder Presentations](#) recommends making a list of potential questions (especially the ones you secretly hope no one will ask) and practicing your "off-the-cuff" answers.

Leave them wanting more. While we're on the subject of Q & A, stay in control of question and answer sessions - especially with a large audience where you risk losing the attention of 99 people by focusing too long on one individual, says Claudyne Wilder. Respond to each question thoughtfully, but don't get bogged down with too much information. "Answer the question as briefly as possible and wait until you're asked before offering more details," Wilder says. "Don't keep talking until the person's eyes glaze over."

Schedule a dress rehearsal. If possible, do a full run-through of your presentation in the venue, using the projector, sound system and podium exactly as you plan to on the day of your talk. Test linked media and bring a copy of your presentation files on CD-ROM just in case you have technical problems with your laptop on the day of the presentation. (See Presentation Librarian CD-ROM Edition, below.)

Have good backup. The Pips. The Supremes. The E Street Band. Even the best need good backup. Make sure you have strong support - a projector you trust, a microphone you're comfortable with and presentation software that takes the guesswork out of developing and delivering content - and whether you're speaking to a handful or hundreds you'll be able to focus on your audience and deliver your message with confidence and conviction.